



Finding and Understanding Irish Places Names

Dan Poffenberger, AG®

British Research Specialist
poffenbergerds@familysearch.org

Being able to understand and explore the places your ancestor lived in Ireland is valuable, not only to your research, but to understanding your ancestors lives better. Any given place in Ireland is part of multiple government, church and social jurisdictions. The purpose of this course is to teach you these jurisdictions, how you can find the ones that applied to where your ancestors lived as well as the records associated with them. It will also help you understand how they may have changed over time.

The island of Ireland is about the size of the state of Indiana. Historically, it is made up of four provinces and 32 counties. The four provinces with their counties are:

Connaught – Galway, Leitrim, Mayo, Roscommon and Sligo

Leinster – Carlow, Dublin, Kildare, Kilkenny, Laois (Queens), Longford, Louth, Meath, Offaly (Kings), Westmeath, Wexford, and Wicklow

Munster – Clare, Cork, Kerry, Limerick, Tipperary, and Waterford

Ulster – Antrim, Armagh, Cavan, Derry (Londonderry), Donegal, Down, Fermanagh, Monaghan and Tyrone

Of the nine Ulster counties, six (Antrim, Armagh, Londonderry, Down and Fermanagh) became the Northern Ireland part of the United Kingdom.

Types of Jurisdictions

Country

Starting from large to small, the island of Ireland is currently divided into two countries. In 1922, the island was divided into Northern Island which officially is part of the United Kingdom of Great Britain and Northern Ireland. The second and larger part is the Republic of Ireland, sometimes called the Irish Free State.

Counties

Until this year, all of Ireland was divided into counties, 26 in the Republic of Ireland and 6 in Northern Ireland. These counties date to at least 1606 (when County Wicklow was created) and many go much earlier to the 12th and 13th centuries when Ireland first began to be controlled by the King of England, Henry II and therefore followed the English system. From a government prospective, the primary role of the county was to administer royal control over taxation, security and law and order at the local level. Generally, Irish counties also reflect the lordships of major Gaelic families. Knowing the name of the county is important because there are often parishes and townlands with similar names and knowing the name of the county is one way to tell them apart. It also common for those looking for the origins of an emigrant from Ireland to know only the name of the county.

The county of Londonderry is called that by the United Kingdom including Northern Ireland. The Republic of Ireland calls it simply Derry.

Probate Districts

In 1858, an Irish Principal Probate Registry was created along with eleven district registries for the sole purposes of dealing with matters of probate. These twelve registries proved wills and appointed administrators for those who died without one but with heritable property. Knowing the name of the probate district is important for any post-1857 probate research.

Baronies

Now obsolete, historically, counties were further divided into baronies in the 16th century at the time of the Tudor re-conquest of Ireland. Ultimately there were 331 baronies in all Ireland. The governmental role of the barony however was minimal. Until 1898 baronies had some modest taxation and spending functions. Although rare, occasionally, knowing the name of the barony will help with Irish research.

Poor Law Unions

Under the Poor Relief Act of 1838, Ireland was divided into Poor Law Unions in a similar way to England in 1834. The unions were usually centered around larger market towns and did not follow county boundaries. By 1850, there were 163 unions and in 1898, the Local Government Act adopted the union as the basic administrative division in place of the civil parish. The unions were further divided into district electoral districts for the taking of censuses. The boundaries of the Poor Law Unions were very important as they were later used when the Superintendent Registrar's Districts were created for the government registration of births, marriages and deaths.

Civil Parishes

Baronies were further divided into civil parishes of which there are more than 2400 in Ireland. Traditionally, civil parish boundaries corresponded to the Church of Ireland parish boundaries. Over time in the late 1700's and early 1800's, government-like responsibilities traditionally performed by the Church of Ireland such as taxation, caring for the poor, maintaining roads, and administering justice were taken over by civil parishes. Knowing the name of the civil parish is important whether researching a Roman Catholic, an Anglican or someone of any other religion because the FamilySearch Catalog place search has organized Ireland by civil parish. It is also civil parish by which a number of tax records are organized. It should also be noted that large cities will contain several parishes.

Townlands

The smallest jurisdiction any Irish research will likely deal with is the townland. A townland is not a town nor is it a township in the United States sense. It is the smallest official land division in Ireland. It does not have its own government. It is a surveyed parcel of land ranging from a few acres to several thousand acres though the average size is about 350 acres. There are approximately 64,000 townlands in Ireland. Parish, parish tax and other records often record the townland in which someone is living. When researching an Irish emigrant, it may be said that once the townland they are from has been learned, the migration problem is absolutely solved. As with parishes, townlands do not always follow established parish boundaries and as an actual town grew, it may grow to cover all or parts of several townlands.

Church Jurisdictions

Diocese (Roman Catholic and Anglican)

The jurisdiction of diocese can be a bit confusing because there were two prominent religions using the term as a primary jurisdiction. The Church of Ireland, or in other words, the Church of England in Ireland, came to Ireland in the 1500's. They adopted a similar number of dioceses as was already established by the Roman Catholic Church since the 1100's. Both religions had 22 dioceses in four provinces. Over time, the Church of Ireland and the Roman Catholic Church have gone their own direction so that now, for example, the Church of Ireland has 12 dioceses in two provinces while the Roman Catholic Church still has 22 dioceses in 4 provinces. The boundaries of the dioceses have no relationship to county boundaries. Knowing the name of the diocese is important because some records are kept at the diocesan level and prior to 1858, wills were proved at the diocese level.

Church of Ireland (Anglican) Parishes

The Church of Ireland parish boundaries were effectively established in the 1600's. It was The Established or State Church for Ireland and therefore wielded significant power and influence. The requirement to keep registers dates to 1634 though only 49 Church of Ireland parishes have registers that begin prior to 1700. Most that survive date to between 1770 and 1820. In 1869, the Church of Ireland was disestablished as the state church of Ireland and in 1875 and 1876, legislation was passed that registers of baptisms and burials to 1870 and marriages up to 31 March 1845 be deposited at the Public Record Office in Dublin. 1,006 Church of Ireland parishes (more than half) had complied with this request and when the Public Record Office burned in 1922, of these, four are believed to have survived with another 637 surviving in local custody. Because of transcripts of parish registers made prior to the fire, the estimate is that roughly 2/3rds of pre-1870 Church of Ireland parish registers were destroyed. Nonetheless, there were legal benefits to belonging to the Church of Ireland, at least in name, so available records need to be checked. Jurisdictionally, Church of Ireland parishes became the civil parish boundaries so it is important to know how to find them.

Roman Catholic Parishes

Roman Catholic parishes were larger than Church of Ireland parishes though often the boundaries are similar; two or three Church of Ireland or civil parishes may fit within one Roman Catholic boundary. It should also be noted that the name of the parish may be different from that of the local Church of Ireland or civil parishes. Roman Catholic boundaries can also cross county boundaries. Because the Roman Catholic Church was not the established Church of Ireland, its registers were not deposited at the Public Record Office and therefore not affected by the fire. However, records were not well kept and on average begin about 1820. Outside the Province of Ulster, in 1861, about 90% of the population was Roman Catholic. In the Province of Ulster, 55% were Catholic and when the six counties that are now part of the United Kingdom are excluded, 75% are Catholic. Even in the six counties of Northern Ireland, approximately 45% of the population was Catholic as of 1861 so understanding the Roman Catholic parishes and their records is important regardless of where research is being performed in Ireland.

Presbyterian Congregations

The Presbyterian Church is the third large religious group in Ireland. It was introduced into Ireland when the Scottish were invited to settle on plantations predominantly in the modern counties of Armagh, Cavan, Donegal, Londonderry and Tyrone. Presbyterians did not follow the parish structure like the Church of Ireland or Roman Catholics. Rather congregations were formed as needed based on the growth of the church without strict parish boundaries. Records

also tend to be lacking for the Presbyterian Church, for example marriages performed by Presbyterian ministers were not considered legal until 1782 and a marriage between a Presbyterian and member of the Church of Ireland was not considered legal until 1845. By 1660, there were about 100,000 Presbyterians in Ireland and by 1861, there were 433 Presbyterian congregations, 650,000 people identifying themselves as Presbyterian, 96% of which were in the Province of Ulster. The earliest surviving register dates to 1674 however it was not until 1819 that the Synod required a register be kept and many don't actually start until 1830. Jurisdictionally, the strategy is to learn where Presbyterian congregations were known to exist and in which civil parish that congregation is located.

Tools for Finding Places: Gazetteers

A gazetteer is a dictionary of place names. It describes those places, often in a variety of contexts. It is important to learn about the places your ancestor lived because not only can it add to your knowledge of the locality in which they lived, it will help determine what civil and church parishes to search for records.

Online Gazetteers and Resources

- Lewis' Topographical Dictionary of Ireland: www.libraryireland.com/topog
- Parliamentary Gazetteer of Ireland is online at Google Books: (<http://books.google.com/books?id=KMtAAAAAYAAJ&dq=Parliamentary%20gazetteer%20of%20Ireland&source=gbs>); use other search engines
- General Alphabetical Index to the Townlands and Towns of Ireland: www.thecore.com/seanruad - This is a great index to the 60,000 plus townlands. The search engine includes "begins with" and "ends with" for those difficult to read townlands.
- Maps and Gazetteers – www.genuki.org.uk – check under both country & county level
- Placenames in the north of Ireland: <http://www.geographyinaction.co.uk/Townlands/Pnamesresearch.html>
- Public Record Office of Northern Ireland (PRONI) Geographical Index: http://www.proni.gov.uk/index/local_history/geographical_index.htm

Tools for Finding Places: Maps

Online Maps

The usual mapping websites have modern maps of Ireland. These include websites like:

- Google: <http://maps.google.ie> – Although this is a modern mapping system, it does surprising well for the locations of townlands (not their boundaries however).
- MapQuest: <http://www.mapquest.com/maps?country=IE>

For maps of the provinces, counties, baronies and poor law unions, a simple internet search using search terms like "Ireland barony map" or "Ireland poor law union map" will usually give results. It may be necessary to select the "images" option on whatever web browser is being used.

- A Vision of Britain: <http://www.visionofbritain.org.uk/> - This website has numerous free maps of Ireland covering a wide range of years and searches well at the county and major city level.

- Irish Ancestors: <https://www.johngrenham.com/> - This has become a powerful tool for not only showing maps but for linking to records. Click on "Places" in the row near the top. Then not that you can do a parish or county search or, just as easy, browse by clicking on "Civil parish maps", "RC parish maps" or on "Poor Law Union maps". You can link to digitized parish, civil and census records.
- Ireland Ordnance Survey Maps 1829 – 1842.
<http://maps.osi.ie/publicviewer/#V1,588882,739883,0,10> - They include 6" and 25" maps and are very helpful in locating small places in the early 1800's.
- AskaboutIreland: <http://www.askaboutireland.ie/griffith-valuation/> - The Griffith's Valuation section of the AskaboutIreland website has "Family Name Search", "Place Name Search", and "Name Books Search" options. The Names Books Search is currently being developed and incomplete. The Place Name search goes directly to Griffith's Valuation for any particular parish or townland entered. The Family Name and Place Name Searches have links to great maps of townlands including the property numbers which correspond to the map reference numbers given in the Valuation.
- Atlas to the Topographical Dictionary of Ireland: A link to maps is available on the FamilySearch Wiki (http://www.proni.gov.uk/index/local_history/geographical_index.htm)
- University College Dublin: <http://digital.ucd.ie/> - University College Dublin has a collection of historical digitized maps of Ireland
- The Down Survey of Ireland: <http://downsurvey.tcd.ie/> - A fascinating look at a County Down land survey at the time of the Ulster Plantations. Online and free.

Maps in Books/Microform and/or at the Family History Library

- A New Genealogical Atlas of Ireland (see Further Reading for call number): Maps of counties, baronies, dioceses, poor law unions, civil parishes, Roman Catholic parishes and the locations of Presbyterian congregations in civil parishes.

Further Reading and Resources

Mitchell, Brian. A new genealogical atlas of Ireland. Baltimore, Maryland : Genealogical Pub. Co., c2002. Family History Library Call Number: 941.5 E7m 2002.

Grenham, John. Tracing your Irish ancestors [4th edition]. Baltimore, Maryland : Genealogical Pub. Co., c2012. Family History Library Call Number: 941.5 D27gj 2012.